



United States Mission to the OSCE

Statement on Concerns Regarding Belarus Elections

As delivered by Ambassador Julie Finley
to the Permanent Council, Vienna
March 16, 2006

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

We had hoped that the intervention we made at last week's Permanent Council would have been the last one before the Belarusian election. However, developments over the past few days have again obliged us to speak out on behalf of those members of the opposition who have been harassed and treated unfairly by Belarusian authorities.

On March 7th, police arrested Anatoliy Lebedko and other members of opposition candidate Aleksandr Milinkevich's campaign team after a rally. Lebedko was fined the equivalent of \$750 or around 600 Euros for holding what was called an illegal demonstration. Vladimir Shantsov, Milinkevich's regional campaign head, was sentenced to 15 days in jail. Then, on March 8th, police arrested Belarusian Popular Front Party leader Vintsuk Vyachorka, who also serves as a senior official for the Milinkevich campaign, along with nine other campaign supporters. All were sentenced to 15 days in prison, also for supposedly taking part in an illegal demonstration.

On March 12th, a number of Belarusian and Ukrainian citizens were detained while attending a Milinkevich rally; including a Ukrainian television reporter who was reporting live when she and her cameraman were apprehended by police. There are also reports that a number of opposition activists, including Lebedko, were detained during the period of March 13-15th.

It is important to note that this pattern of arrests violates OSCE commitments on free elections, including Copenhagen Document paragraph 7.7, which states that political campaigning be "conducted in a free and fair atmosphere in which neither administrative action, violence nor intimidation bars the parties and the candidates from freely presenting their views." Even though the Belarusian Electoral Code states that candidates can meet with voters, the police claimed the March 8th rally was an unsanctioned demonstration.

We must reiterate that free and fair elections do not just mean free and fair operations on election day, but – more importantly – the lead-up to the elections as well.

Additionally, we felt compelled to note the seizure of 28,000 Milinkevich campaign leaflets in the city of Gomel on March 7th. Evidentially, more than 300,000 copies of the independent newspaper *Narodnaya Volya* have also been seized. This Sunday, the people of Belarus will cast their ballots for a new president. Despite the innumerable calls for Belarus to live up to its freely undertaken OSCE commitments, the government's conduct has only become more repressive with the passage of time. These are not the actions of a government that intends to hold free and fair elections. All of this will affect the overall assessment of the elections.

We remind Belarusian authorities in the event that protests are held in response to electoral fraud, that the right to peacefully assemble is an inalienable human right and a basic tenet of the OSCE. Any violent suppression of peaceful protests will have serious repercussions.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.